Epiphany Sermon 01 05 2020
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Grace to you and peace…

Merry Christmas! Depending on how one counts, today, according to the song, “my true love” gave to me either 11 pipers piping, or 12 drummers drumming. The confusion comes from whether you count Dec. 25 or 26 as “the first day of Christmas.”

In any case, with Matthew’s telling of the wise ones from the East, the season of Christmas comes to a close. Though tomorrow is the liturgical date of Epiphany, we choose to observe this significant day on a Sunday when we can count on gathering as a worshipping community. We take a turn from the Holy Child in the Manger to the Light that reveals Holiness to all nations.

An epiphany is an insight. A revelation. A knowing that was previously unknown. It’s a little hard for those so familiar with the tale of the Three Kings to experience the surprising revelation contained in this story. So let’s take a close look at what the gospel writer actually tells us. And when we’ve considered the details, I want to pose a few questions for you. You can follow along with me.

The kingship of Herod marks the time of this story. Herod is a cruel despot, a marginally Jewish man whose authority is bestowed upon him by the Roman Empire – so long as he produces the requisite results. He works for the occupying force as an instrument of oppression over his own people.
It’s also the time “after Jesus was born.” Remember that Matthew does not tell the story of Jesus’ birth; we get that story from the gospel of Luke that was read on Christmas Eve. Let it suffice for now to remember that Jesus was born as a defenseless, vulnerable infant, outside of, and yet at the mercy of the political structure of the day.

If the time is marked by Herod’s rule and Jesus’ birth, the location is “Bethlehem in Judea.” This is an ancient Middle Eastern story. From our own location in 21st century United States, it’s really hard to experience this story as it actually occurred. Bethlehem was a small village not far from Jerusalem. Today it is located on the wrong side of the security wall in Israel…in Palestinian territory.

The starring characters today are the magi. These are scholars, mystics, astrologers from a far away land. They are practitioners of another faith tradition. They are, explicitly, not Jews, and not Romans. They are “other.” While our text calls them “wise men” the word Magi does not indicate their gender…nor does it specify how many.

These wise ones come to Jerusalem, the site of the Jewish Temple; today a holy city for Jews, for Christians, and for Muslims.

Notice the question of the visitors. Where is this child “born king of the Jews,” whom the stars proclaim? These wise ones are attentive and curious – about the movement of the stars and
planets in the darkness, about the traditions of other religions, and seemingly also about other countries and cultures. They have seen his star “at its rising,” which means they are observant of the natural world, willing to recognize the “first book” of creation as a source of revelation.

The purpose of their journey is to pay homage to this newly born ruler of a foreign nation. These “others” put themselves at considerable inconvenience in order to give honor and respect to someone well outside their own faith, culture, country, and traditions. That their first inquiry was at the palace of the king shows their understanding of political protocol.

In the face of such openness, respect, honor, and curiosity, Herod’s response was fear. More accurately we can say that both Herod and all of Jerusalem were “shaken” by this unexpected arrival. Hearing word of a new king, Herod’s authority is threatened. Imagine the fragility of his confidence in his status and position. The magi seem to have triggered a memory of his childhood faith formation, because Herod knew enough to ask his experts what scripture had to say about the promised Messiah. He wasn’t particularly familiar with scripture himself, but he knew who to ask, and he seems willing to grant that sacred scripture could reveal truth.

A frightened ruler is a dangerous ruler. After hearing from his chief priests and scribes, Herod turns to secrecy. No longer out in the open of political protocol and religious knowledge, Herod conceals his intentions by speaking in secret with the magi. I wonder if they could sense his urgency and fear as he pressed
them for details – the exact time of the star’s appearing – and his manipulative claim that he, too, wanted to pay homage to this child.

Taking leave of Herod the wise ones continued their journey by following the star. It’s worth noting that you can’t really follow the leading of a star in the bright light of day; stars are only clearly visible at night. Sometimes darkness is essential for revelation.

I don’t know how you can tell that a star has stopped. I imagine it must have finally been directly overhead when they concluded their journey was complete; and they were overwhelmed with joy.

They entered the house…not the stable. Here there is no indication of the displacement due to a census. No reference to a feeding trough for livestock; just a house, where they saw the child with Mary, his mother. The star had led them to their destination and, in an act of utmost honor and devotion, they prostrated themselves before this one born king of the Jews. These strangers from far away give reverence and respect to a Divine promise from outside their tradition, that had been revealed to them by what was written in the stars.

After paying homage it came time to give gifts. The word picture of “opening their treasure chests” implies a much larger entourage than three men with boxes. Treasure chests speak of wealth and abundance at the disposal of these magi. Out of their treasure the gifts they give are strange gifts to give to a child. Gold indicates Jesus’ royalty; frankincense is used for worship; and myrrh is a
spice used for burial. These gifts are indeed part of an epiphany, pointing to the identity and role of this holy child.

Warned in a dream not to return to Herod, these wise ones went home by another road. They were not taken in by Herod’s scheme, and they were not above subverting the king’s command.

Friends, I am filled with questions. In these twelve days of Christmas we have heard again from our rich faith tradition the details of Jesus’ birth, the proclamation of the angel army, the witness of the shepherds. Last Sunday took us into the dark violence unleashed by Herod as he ordered the killing of innocent children to protect his own claim to power. Today we hear the back-story that inspired Herod’s act of terror.

How did Christianity come to be such an enclave of whiteness in America? How did this vulnerable infant, laid to rest in a feeding trough, and threatened by the powers of Empire, ever become co-opted to reinforce the values and status quo of empires across the ages? How did God-with-us in the flesh, good news for all nations, ever become distorted into an exclusive and punishing threat of God’s wrath? How did this holy child, whose parentage was questionable by the standards of the day, ever come to reinforce purity culture and the domination of women? How in the world did this birth of a brown-skinned baby, revealed by a great light that can only be seen in the darkness of night, ever become twisted into justification that dark-skinned people are less valuable than people with light skin?! How did followers of Jesus, Emmanuel, ever let this happen? How do we let this happen?
I know it’s been happening for centuries. I understand that these questions are over simplified. And I realize that the structures of power, like Herod from Jesus’ very birth, have been insidious in finding ways to distort and manipulate faith to control the people.

But we, like the magi, have seen the truth revealed in the mystery of Christmas. We recognize the vulnerability of God in the face of a newborn. We know that God dwells with us in holy love, embodied just as we are. We have heard the good news of great joy for all the people that Christ comes into the world with compassion and mercy, with healing and saving grace. We understand the promise of this one who will bring all nations together for the sake of peace on earth.

It is ours, dear friends, to be bold witnesses to the Christ revealed in this festival of Christmas. We simply cannot remain silent as the message of Jesus, the revelation of God’s love for all creation is distorted by lies of white supremacy and xenophobia. We cannot stand by as God’s great good news is used as a weapon of oppression against any part of humanity. With the birth of Christ, hope is born in our hearts and our world is in desperate need of a word of hope. Now the work of Christmas begins.

Borrowing the words of Howard Thurman:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among (people),
To make music in the heart.

Happy New Year. Amen.